

# Kansas Preservation

Newsletter of the Cultural Resources Division ▪ Kansas State Historical Society



*Over the years, Route 66 developed a mythical stature. While just over thirteen miles of the “Mother Road” cross through Kansas, the impact on the commercial and cultural landscape is significant.*

*Article on page 5.*



# Route 66 in Kansas

During the summer of 2002, the Kansas State Historical Society contracted with Historic Preservation Services, LLC (HPS) of Kansas City, Missouri, to inventory the resources historically associated with Route 66 in Kansas. The roots of this project lie in an initiative of the National Park Service (NPS) to document and preserve the history of this important transportation corridor. The NPS 1995 “Special Resources Study” of Route 66 describes the road as “a prime example of a historic transportation corridor — a linear cultural landscape comprising a historically significant route along which people and/or goods have moved.” The most significant, defining aspects of this cultural landscape are the public works and the commercial architecture, as well as other distinctive structures and landmarks not necessarily related to the road itself but which, when combined with the natural elements of the corridor, “endow [the road] with its distinctive character.”

The Route 66 survey in Kansas identified ninety-nine buildings and structures constructed during the period of significance, 1926-1953.<sup>1</sup> Among these were public works (sections of road bed, bridges, and culverts); a wide variety of commercial resources (gas stations, restaurants, commercial and office buildings); and a few residences. Twenty-nine of these resources possess a clear relationship to the road and retain sufficient architectural integrity to merit listing on the National Register for their associations with Route 66.

The archeological staff of the State Historic Preservation Office also examined the corridor for the presence of Route 66-related archeological resources and identified five sites that might merit inclusion in the National Register.

Following the completion of the survey, HPS prepared a National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF) for “Historic Resources of Route 66 in Kansas” and three National Register nominations. The first nomination documents a historic district that includes a section of historic roadbed east of downtown Galena and a viaduct and several culverts built in 1923. This district is a rare example of the cultural landscape of the road as it appeared when designated as US 66 in 1926. The other two nominations were for individual properties: “The Williams Store” (more commonly known as Eisler Brothers or the Old Riverton Store) in Riverton and “The Baxter Springs Independent Oil and Gas Company Station” (now Groomers dog grooming parlor) in Baxter Springs. The nomination of the Williams Store recognizes a unique vernacular property in operation continuously since 1925, offering patrons gas, food, and general merchandise. The Baxter Springs Independent Oil and Gas Company Station is an excellent example of a 1920s cottage-style service station designed according to corporate design standards. The station is also significant for its addition, which accommodated a changing demand for services.



**The Cultural Landscape  
of the “Mother Road”**





*(Left) Williams' Store (more commonly known as Eisler Brothers or the Old Riverton Store) in Riverton*

*(Below) Route 66, East of Galena. A typical culvert is visible in the foreground and the viaduct across the Missouri Kansas and Texas Railroad tracks is visible in the background.*

## Route 66

The name "Route 66" conjures images of cross-country treks, journeys in search of a better life, and adventure. In November 1926 the Federal Highway Commission designated US Highway 66 as part of a new national interstate highway network. This famous road includes roughly thirteen miles through Kansas.

Efforts to create a national highway system began early in the twentieth century spurred by two concurrent movements. In the new age of the automobile, the first movement sought improved roads for long-distance travel. The second sought better roads to enhance rural economic conditions by improving farmers' access to regional markets. By the early twentieth century, automobile enthusiasts nationwide lobbied for the construction of permanent all-weather roads and the expansion of local, state, and national highway systems.

Historically, road construction in Kansas reflected local needs and the desires of the political establishment. In the 1860s, the Territorial legislature established a system that allowed counties to direct the design, construction, and most importantly the funding of their local roads and bridges. By the turn of the next century, the legislature approved general tax levies for road improvements as well as the creation of special benefit districts that taxed adjacent property owners to fund road improvements. Creation of benefit districts was at the discretion of the local board of county commissioners. The larger counties (those with populations exceeding 20,000) could hire a county engineer to supervise all county road and bridgework. Counties could



also seek technical assistance from the State Engineer of Roads and Highways.

The first national vision for an improved highway system was realized when President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916. As its name implies, this legislation provided federal aid to the states over a five-year period for the construction of roads. Federal aid equaled 50 percent of construction costs, up to \$10,000 per mile. State highway agencies recommended projects, but the final determination for funding fell to the Secretary of Agriculture, who oversaw the Bureau of Public Roads.

Implementation of the 1916 Road Act got off to a slow start. America's entry into World War I the following year placed a strain on federal finances and limited road-building materials and personnel. However, cross-country military shipments during the war exacerbated the already poor condition of existing roads

and emphasized the need for a national system of improved highways.

When the 1916 Road Act expired, the Federal Highway Act of 1921 created a system of federal-aid highways that incorporated portions of existing state highways into a network of interstate roads. The 1921 Highway Act ushered in the golden era of road building in the United States. In 1922 the states spent \$189 million to build over 10,000 miles of

---

*This article was prepared by Elizabeth Rosin of Historic Preservation Services under contract to the Kansas State Historical Society. The historical information was originally researched and compiled for the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form on the "Historic Resources of Route 66 in Kansas." All photos are by Elizabeth Rosin unless otherwise designated.*

*Cover image and page five background are from The National Historic Route 66 Federation Collection, [www.national66.org](http://www.national66.org).*

federal-aid roads. This more than tripled the number of road-miles improved since 1916. Typical projects produced graded-earth, sand-clay, or gravel road surfaces.

As the interstate highway system began to take shape, the U.S. Department of Agriculture appointed a Joint Board of Interstate Highways in 1924. Representing state highway commissions from across the country, the five-member board named specific routes and developed insignia for the federal highways. The commission linked segments of existing federal-aid roads to create the new federal interstate road system, devised the interstate highway numbering system, and developed the now ubiquitous shield-shaped signage to help travelers reach their destinations.

The initial concept developed by the Federal Highway Commission's Joint Board for a route from Chicago to southern California followed a course through Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, and Nevada. One member of the Joint Board, Cyrus Avery, a businessman from Tulsa, Oklahoma, successfully lobbied for an alternate route for this particular interstate that followed a more southerly route through Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and

Arizona. Avery contended that this alignment avoided the heavy snows in the Rocky Mountains as well as the long stretches of desert through Nevada. The flatter terrain, he argued, would

also make road building more cost-effective. On November 11, 1926, the Federal Highway Commission formally dedicated the 2,448 miles connecting Chicago to Los Angeles, cobbled together from existing roads through Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, as US Highway 66.

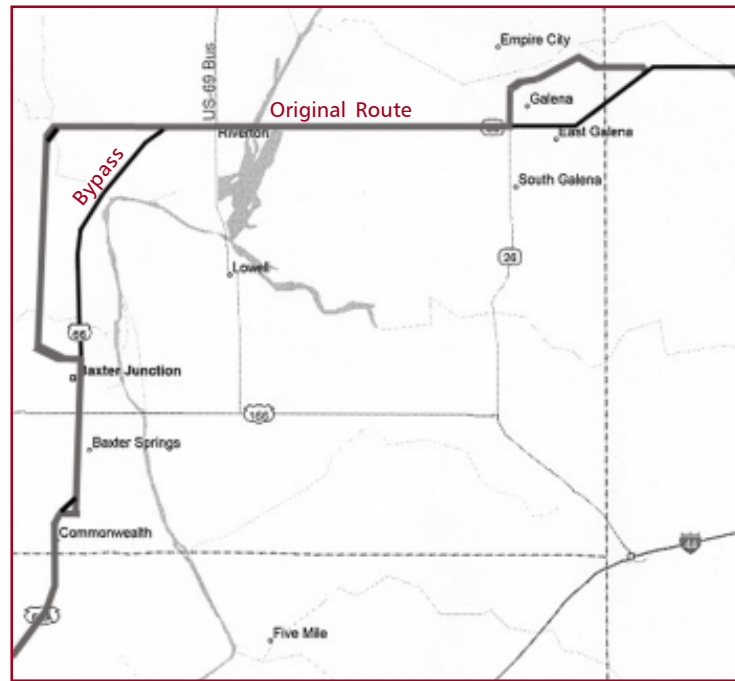
## Route 66 in Kansas

To connect Missouri and Oklahoma, a roughly thirteen-mile segment of Route 66 crossed Cherokee County in the far southeastern corner of Kansas. Like most of the new federal highways, this section of Route 66 followed a previously existing road alignment. From the Missouri state line about one mile east of Galena, it entered the state heading northwest. After passing the Eagle-Picher Smelter, one of the largest active lead smelters in the United States, the road turned south on

*To connect Missouri and Oklahoma, a roughly thirteen-mile segment of Route 66 crossed Cherokee County in the far southeastern corner of Kansas.*

Main Street, passing through the Galena business district. Route 66 turned west again at 7th Street. The road continued west across the Spring River and through the Quaker community of Riverton. Beyond Riverton, Route 66 curved south at the Brush Creek Bridge to Baxter Junction. In Baxter Junction the road turned east and then south on the old military road. Route 66 followed Military Avenue south through downtown Baxter Springs to the Oklahoma state line with a small S-curve south of downtown.

When Route 66 was designated, some of the road segments were paved and others were not. For example, the road between Galena and Riverton began as a cow path. Around 1910 a bridge was constructed across the Spring River. Prosperous early in the twentieth century, thanks to a thriving lead and zinc mining industry, Cherokee County boasted paved roads before many other counties in the state, the region, and the nation. As early as 1904, the county used waste "chat" from the area mines to create a macadam-like surface on roads in the



*Map showing original Route 66 alignment and subsequent bypasses.*

vicinity of Galena and Baxter Springs.

Improvements along the future Route 66 in Kansas occurred in 1922 and 1923, capitalizing on funds made available by the Federal Highway Act of 1921. It was at this time that the viaduct and other structures through the mining district east of Galena were installed, as well as the Marsh Arch bridges east and west of Riverton. In 1923 a group of Galena businessmen helped finance the paving of the road to Riverton. An article reporting the construction of a service station on the Brush Creek "Rainbow Curve" in January 1928 referred to Route 66 as the "Galena-Baxter Springs concrete road," suggesting that the route was fully paved by this date.

After World War II, highway engineers advocated straightening, widening, and bypassing older highways such as Route 66. The 1956 federal interstate highway plan, designed during the Cold War to move munitions and troops quickly, mandated that future road building efforts focus on the construction of new four-lane, limited access roads. When highway officials designed Interstate 44 in the 1960s to replace US Highway 66, they straightened the alignment, and the highway now bypasses Kansas completely.

However, the old road continued to serve the local population, and during the



early 1960s it also received a series of improvements.

- A bypass removed traffic from downtown Galena and from the old Route 66 serving the industrial facilities east of town. The “new” US 66 follows old US 166 east along 7<sup>th</sup> Street, becoming a four-lane divided highway between Galena and Joplin.

- The addition of a second two-lane barrel to the stretch of Route 66 between Galena and Riverton widened the road to four lanes. A grassy median separated the directional traffic. This addition included the construction of a two-lane concrete girder bridge across the Spring River, adjacent to the historic Marsh Arch Bridge originally located just east of Riverton. In the early 1990s the present two-lane concrete girder span replaced the bridge.

- A second bypass connected Riverton and Baxter Springs, beginning at the junction of US Highways 69/166/400 and US 66 just west of Riverton. Rather than follow the old road west to the Brush Creek curve, the bypass makes a gentle arcing curve southwest to join Military Avenue at 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in Baxter Springs. While this alignment is designed for four lanes, only two lanes have been built.

- In Baxter Springs, a new section that follows a wide, smooth curve bypasses the S-curve at the south end of town. A McDonald’s and a Wal-Mart occupy previously open land between the old and new roads.

The final change to old Route 66 in Kansas occurred in 1992 when the construction of a softer curve bypassed the Rainbow Bridge at the Brush Creek curve. After much discussion with the Kansas Historic Route 66 Association, county officials agreed to leave the Brush Creek Bridge standing as a historic landmark.<sup>2</sup> Travelers can see the bridge in its historic setting from the bypass and can choose to drive across the bridge, which is now limited to southbound traffic.

## Commerce of Route 66

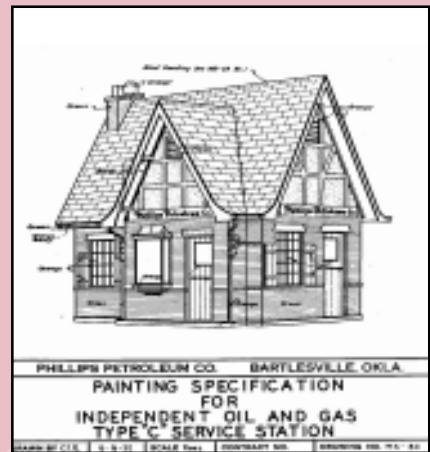
Like other regional and national highways, commercial businesses developed along Route 66 to serve the needs of travelers and their vehicles. There were gas and service stations to keep cars running; restaurants, tourist courts, and motels to service travelers; and various stands and shops that offered diversions.

The design of these buildings and structures reflected popular styles and trends and embraced the adventurous spirit of travel. For example, service stations evolved from simple vernacular



*Baxter Springs Independent Oil and Gas Company Station, 940 Military Avenue, Baxter Springs. Notice that the original cottage station mirrors the IOG prototype shown at right.*

*(Right) Prototype Cottage-style Service Station Design for the Independent Oil and Gas Company. (Citation: Phillips Petroleum Company, “Painting Specifications for Independent Oil and Gas Type “C” Service Station,” [Bartlesville, Oklahoma: Phillips Petroleum Company, 1932]. In the Corporate Archives of the Phillips Petroleum Company, Bartlesville, Oklahoma.)*



*Willow Street Service Station, 145 North Willow Avenue, Baxter Springs, represents a modern streamlined design.*



*Marsh Arch (Rainbow Arch) Bridge at Brush Creek. (Photo by Cathy Ambler.)*



*Remnant of Saterlee's Cabin Court, 124 North Willow Avenue, Baxter Springs. (Photo by Cathy Ambler.)*

buildings with pumps out front to modern designs featuring streamlined, curved corners. As the industry matured, gasoline companies developed standardized plans that made their stations distinctly recognizable to travelers. The prototype design for an Independent Oil and Gas Company (IOG) station is an exact mirror of the IOG cottage station built at the corner of 10<sup>th</sup> Street and Military Avenue in Baxter Springs.

During this period lodging properties evolved from the humble tourist court to the modern motel. At the beginning of the Route 66 era, the communities along Route 66 in Kansas had booming economies that already supported a variety of gas stations and restaurants. The change in the number of tourist courts and motels

during the period of significance most directly reflects the commercial impacts of the road on this area.

The 1930 Baxter Springs Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map shows the Sunbeam Tourist Camp at the southwest corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and Willow Avenue. This camp included eleven cabins, ten of which had attached carports, a central lavatory, and an office. This intersection also had three filling stations and one auto repair shop. By 1942 a second tourist court became part of the milieu. This property included an L-shaped band of six attached cabins, separated by carports, as well as an owner's dwelling. Additional lodging was found at another cabin court on the S-curve south of downtown, near a service station and

Murphey's diner, a 24-hour establishment. After World War II the Capistrano Motel at 22<sup>nd</sup> Street and Military Avenue also provided overnight accommodations.

The 1930 Sanborn map for Galena shows the development of the Camp Joy tourist camp between Galena and Riverton. This complex included a filling station and five cabins with electric lights and stove heat, all of which were arranged in a row fronting Route 66. The Sanborn maps show another small row of cabins in Riverton, on the south side of Route 66 west of Military Road.

Another tourist amenity noted by local residents were rock shops that sold mineral samples to tourists passing through the area. One was located just west of Galena and another was located in Baxter Junction.

As happened across the country, the completion of Interstate 44 drained many long-distance travelers, both recreational and commercial, from the local road. This reduced the volume of traffic traveling the old highway and led to the demise of many existing tourist facilities. A number of the historic gas stations are extant, and while there are no historic motels left along Route 66 in Kansas, there are remnants of two cabin courts at the north end of Baxter Springs.

## **Route 66 Through Kansas Today**

Over the years, Route 66 developed a mythical stature. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck famously chronicled the role of the "Mother Road" in helping the